

STRANDING RECORDS OF A FINBACK WHALE, *Balaenoptera physalus*, FROM MISSISSIPPI AND THE GOOSE-BEAKED WHALE, *Ziphius cavirostris*, FROM LOUISIANA

by

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INTRODUCTION

Stranding records are sometimes the only source of data concerning some species of cetaceans and it is appropriate that these incidents be reported in some detail. This is particularly true of rare or little known species. Bottle-nosed dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) carcasses stranded on the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts are so common that they receive little attention. Other species occur and have, no doubt, been overlooked or confused by laymen with *Tursiops*. Even the rare stranding of large whales in this area may go unreported except for news stories that fail to identify the animal properly and which are not readily available to cetologists.

The stranding in 1967 of one of the first definitely reported finbacks, *Balaenoptera physalus*, in the Gulf of Mexico is given here. It is the first Mississippi record.

Moore (1953) noted that "only six specimens of the goose-beaked whale have been reported on the eastern coast of North America" and provided four new records from the Florida west coast. The present report includes a Louisiana stranding in 1969.

SPECIES ACCOUNT

*Balaenoptera physalus*

The Gulfport Ship Channel extends from the western end of Ship Island, a barrier island off the Mississippi coast, northward across Mississippi Sound for 11.5 nautical miles to the Gulfport Harbor. It has a limiting depth of 40 feet. On 7 April 1967 a baleen whale invaded Mississippi Sound by the ship channel for the first time that this event has ever been reported. This is also probably the first time a whale has entered the bay during the past several hundred years because the waters were too shallow until the ship channel was dug.

The general events have been described by Heiliger (1967) as follows: On the late afternoon of April 7, Captain Peter Skrmetta and Peter B. Lasanen were returning on the Pan-American Clipper, an excursion boat which operates between Gulfport and Ship Island, when they saw a whale spouting near the mouth of the Gulfport Har-



Plate I. Ventral views of belly (a) and tail (b) of a stranded finback whale at Ship Island, Mississippi taken 11 April 1967.



bor. Needless to say, this was most surprising. The next day this whale was found to have run ashore and died inside of Ship Island. It was later towed closer to Fort Massachusetts, the landing point on the island, as an attraction to tourists and excursionists aboard the Pan-American Clipper. This attraction lasted until the odor of the decaying animal became overwhelming, when Captain Skrmetta moved the carcass to the Gulf beach and partially buried it with the help of a dragline dredge mounted on a barge.

A group from the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory, including the senior author, visited Ship Island on April 11 and inspected this whale by going around it in a skiff. Heiliger (1967) had previously estimated the length as 45 feet and the weight at about 12 tons. The animal was a maturing male with a protuberant penis well over a meter long. There was a good bit of blotchy white on the right side of the anterior belly and the lower side of the flukes was white. The inner flippers were also white. Some of this can be seen in the two ventral view photographs (Plate I, a & b). These and all other aspects of the specimen corresponded to the finback whale, *Balaenoptera physalus*.

After this whale had been buried for a few months its head was dug up and exhibited at Fort Massachusetts for the delectation of the excursionists to Ship Island. The actions of thieves and the Hurricane Camille on August 17-18, 1969 have reduced the skull (25 June 1972) to a remnant of one jawbone.

Records of *Balaenoptera* sp. from Louisiana have been summarized by Lowery (1943). The Louisiana State University Museum had a piece of balcen from a probably Louisiana or Mississippi specimen of *B. physalus* taken about 1928. Several more probable and a couple of definite records from Louisiana will be summarized by Lowery (in press).

### *Ziphius cavirostris*

We first received the report of a whale stranded on the Chandeleur Islands of Louisiana from Mr. Bob Stevens who saw it on a routine inspection flight of the Gulf Islands National Wildlife Refuge in April 1969. The carcass was located later on 15 May 1969 by J. Y. Christmas, Tom McIlwain and Lionel Eleuterius. It was partially buried in the berm about five miles south of Chandeleur Lighthouse on the Gulf beach (approx. lat. 29° 58' N, long. 88° 49' W.). Heavy surf prevented landing on the Gulf beach, but Captain Kenneth Melvin was able to put the party ashore from Chandeleur Sound, across the island.

The skin had sloughed off the carcass so that muscle tissue was exposed on some areas of the body. It lay on the right side with dorsal fin and flukes buried. The beak was about half buried with jaws open at 10-15°. The whole body was blackened so that natural color could

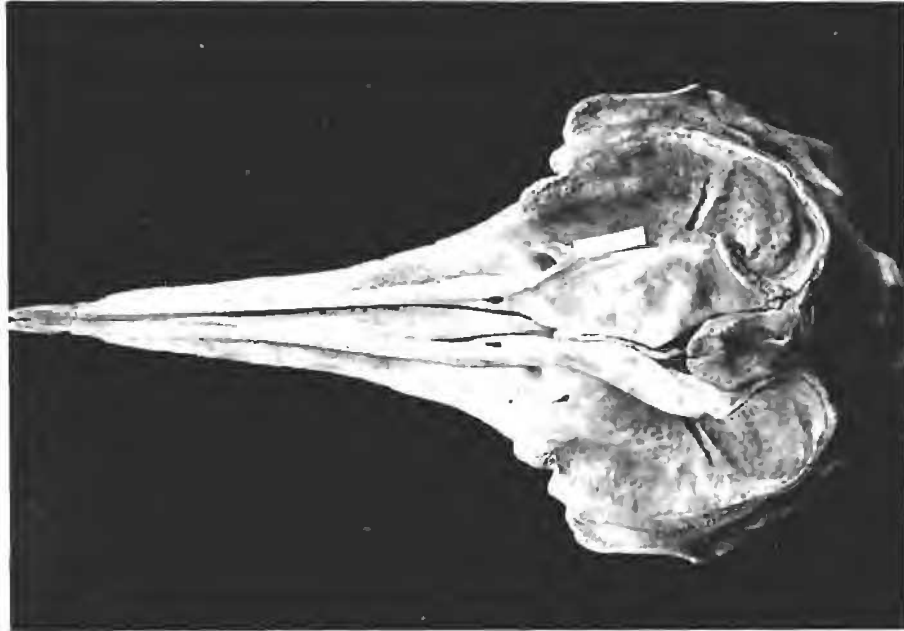
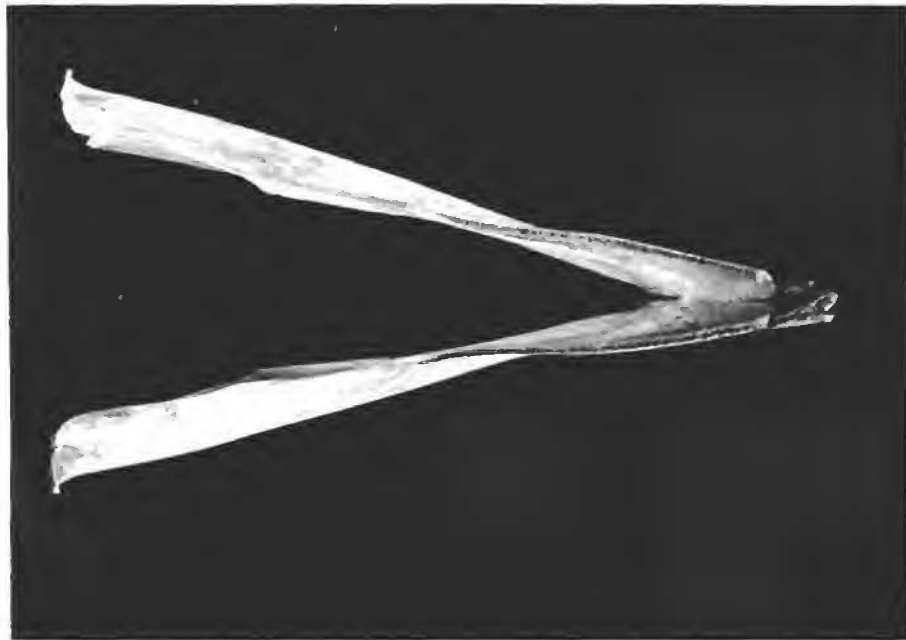


Plate II. Upper view of skull (a) and mandibles (b) of a specimen of the goose-beaked whale found on the Chandeleur Islands, Louisiana in April 1969. Courtesy of Dr. G. H. Lowery, Jr.



not be ascertained. The viscera were pushed into the mouth and an area about 46 cm in diameter around the anus was distended.

When dug out, the dorsal fin and flukes were essentially intact but their shape was not clearly discernible. Teeth could not be seen. Somewhat crude measurements made with a meter stick were as follows:

|                                      |                                       |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Total length—559 cm.<br>(18.1 ft.)   | Lower jaw length—38 cm.               |
| Maximum body depth—106 cm.           | Upper jaw length—35.6 cm.             |
| Tip of beak to dorsal base—336 cm.   | Flukes, Maximum width—112 cm.         |
| Tip of beak to eye—71 cm.            | Blowhole (located behind eye)—7.6 cm. |
| Tip of beak to pectoral base—132 cm. |                                       |

The carcass was left intact because any parts that could have been removed could not be carried across the island to the boat.

About a month later, J. Y. Christmas and Richard Waller returned and landed on the Gulf beach. Decomposition was considerably advanced. The head, tail and left pectoral were removed, placed on a sheet of polyethylene and dragged into the water. A piece of nylon webbing was secured around the whole bundle and it was lifted to the trawl deck of the boat. The return trip stank.

At the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory the bundle was buried above normal tides. A few days after Hurricane Camille had inundated the whole area we found that only shallow erosion had occurred at the burial site, exposing the end of the beak. One tooth was found on the ground. The head was still putrid. It was covered and not disturbed again until Dr. George H. Lowery, Jr. removed the material to Louisiana State University for museum preparation.

He has kindly furnished photographs of the cleaned specimen which is now LSUMZ15609. Plate II is an upper view of the skull (a) and the mandibles (b) of this specimen. Doctor Lowery (personal communication) was able to confirm our tentative identification as *Ziphius cavirostris*. He later carried photographs to London where F. C. Fraser at the British Museum concurred in this identification.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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